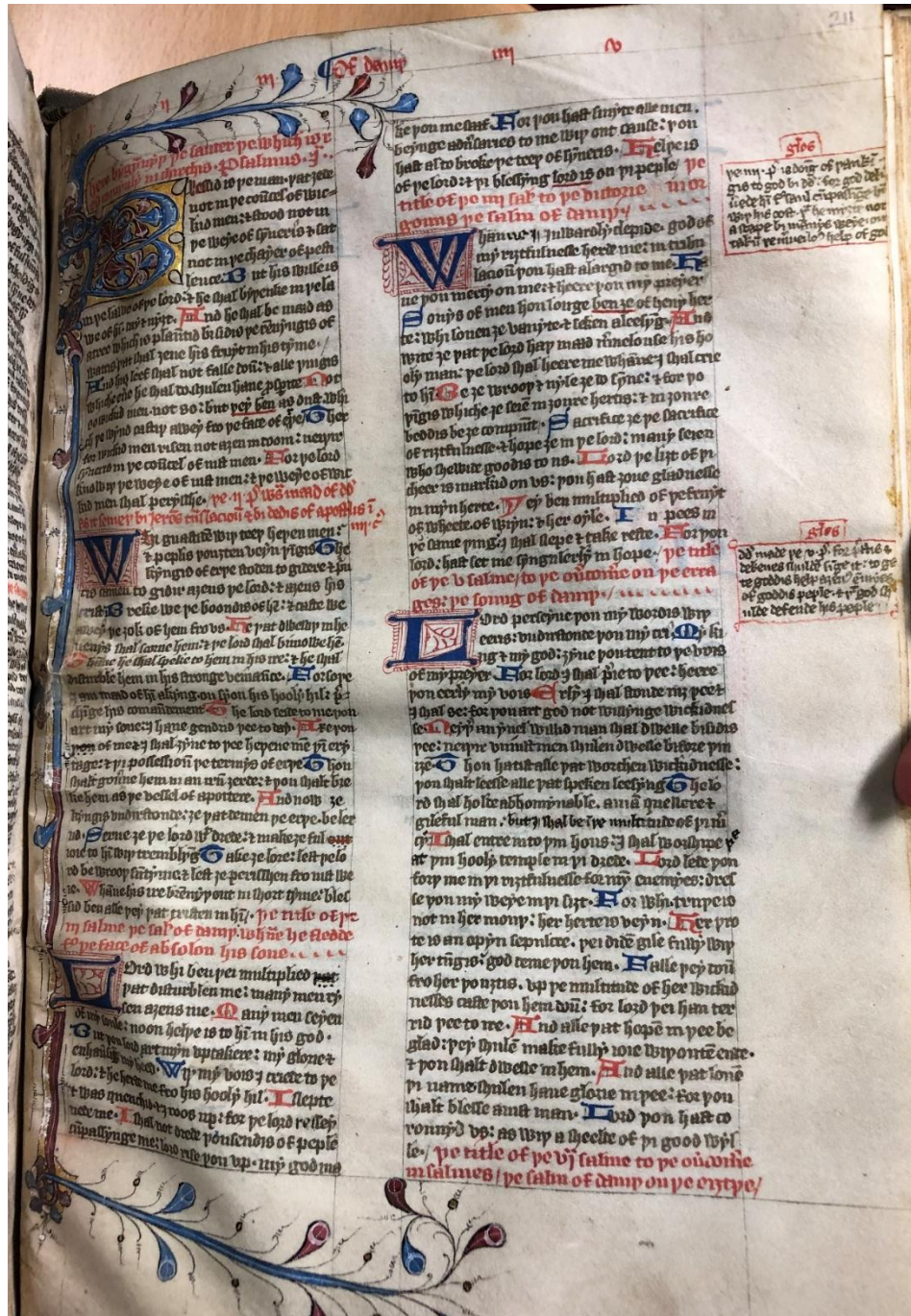
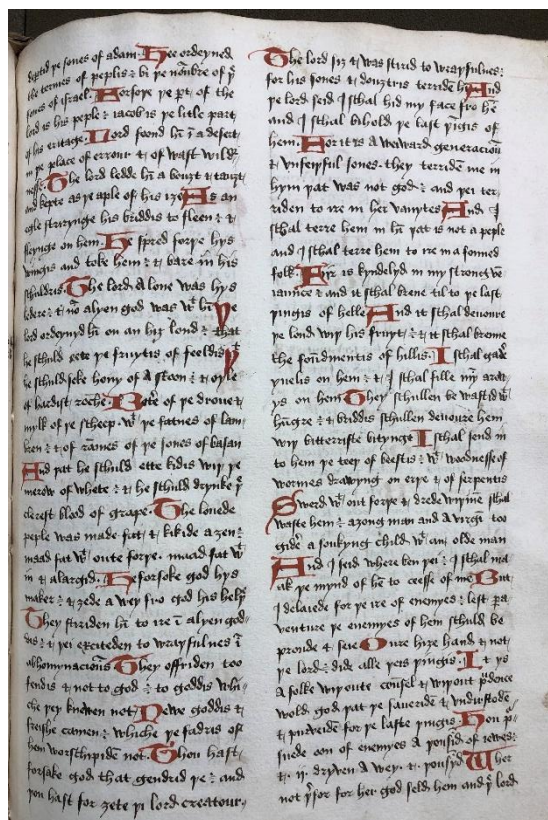


A Hard Day for the Scribe of MS 66, a Wycliffite Bible in New College, Oxford

New College MS 66 presents us with an early fifteenth-century Wycliffite Old Testament in the Later Version, starting with Genesis and ending at the Psalms. Due to missing quires, the manuscript cuts off abruptly with a rubric for Proverbs. This c. 310 × 219 mm parchment codex of 184 leaves contains marginal glosses, initials decorated with foliage, and a few gold initials. The production puts its Wycliffite Old Testament little brother, New College MS 320, to some shame.



New College Library, Oxford, MS 66, f. 211r



New College Library, Oxford, MS 320, f. 43r

All these lavish features notwithstanding, one wonders if the scribe of New College MS 66 may have been in a hurry—a terrible disadvantage when trying to copy the Old Testament. Elizabeth Solopova observes ‘many corrections in the original or contemporary hands in the margins, within the text and over erasures (some lengthy corrections are in Anglicana); some text is crossed out in red.’¹ Add that to the memory of copying Deuteronomy 4:2,² along with John Wycliffe’s theology of Scripture breathing down a scribe’s neck, and a downward spiral of nervous mistakes might plague the rest of a scribe’s work day.

Let us take a look at some mistakes and their corrections.

The scribe did not write the Latin incipits usually included in Wycliffite psalters. Instead, before each psalm, the scribe thoughtfully gave us the psalm numbers so that we do not, say, confuse Psalm 14 with Psalm 53. These notes include psalm titles. For example, the scribe began one psalm thus:

*þe title of xlix salme, þe salme of asaph.*³

Such titles are common practice for Wycliffite psalters. Another:

þe title of lxii salme of dauip: whanne he was in desert of Jude.

¹ Elizabeth Solopova, *Manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible in the Bodleian and Oxford College Libraries* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), pp. 257-58.

² ‘You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it’ (NRSV).

³ This is Psalm 50 in modern bibles. The Wycliffite Psalter used slightly different numbering.

The next psalm was titled:

þe title of lxxiii to þe victorie, þe salme, dauip.

Or a particularly long one:

þe title of the lviij salme, to þe ouercomere þat þou leese not dauip meeke & simple: whanne saul sente & kepte þe hous to slee hym.

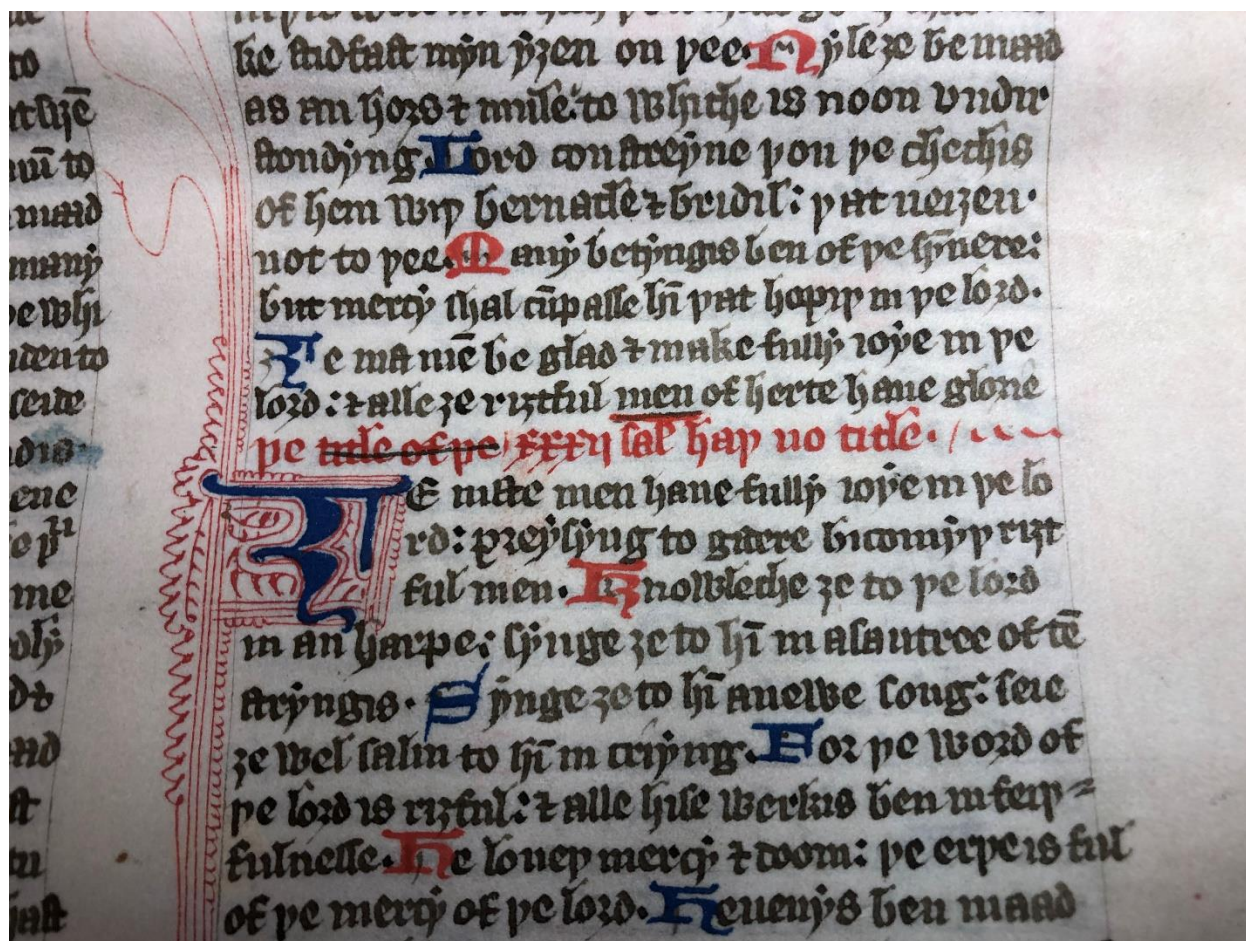
And so on and so forth.

Most psalms have a title, but some titles, it seems, existed to trip up our scribe. On the bottom of fol. 215r, right before a yogh initial, our scribe began a psalm with the following:

þe title of þe xxxii salm

Quickly realizing his mistake, he crossed out 'title of þe' for the final product:

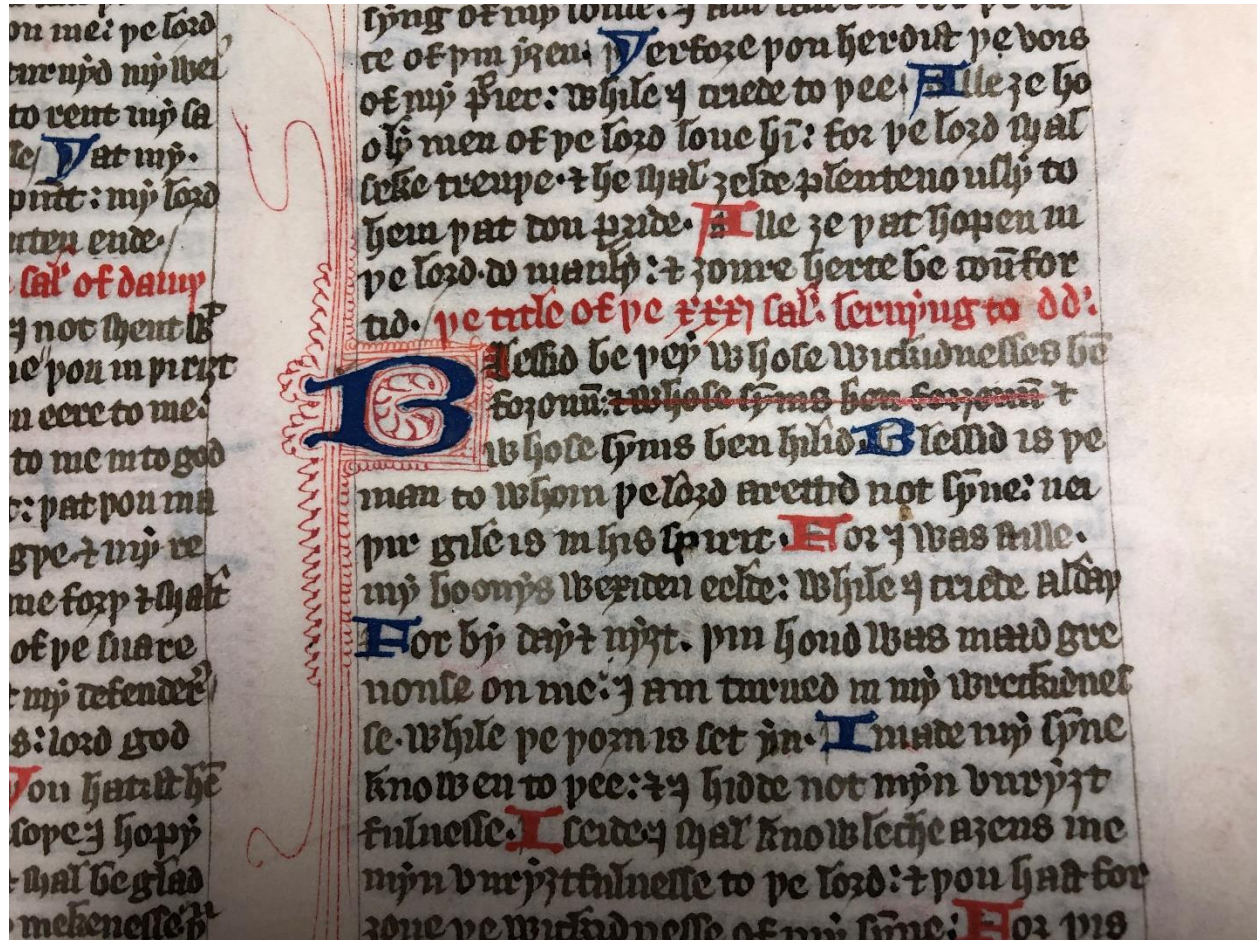
þe ~~title of þe~~ xxxii salm hap no title.



New College Library, Oxford, MS 66, f. 215r
[Detail: lower right corner]

Our scribe must have been having a hard day, for this was not the only mistake made on fol. 215r. Here is another correction that smells of the lamp:

pe title of pe xxxi salm: lernyng to d[au]id: Blessid be þey whose wickidnesses ben forȝouun: [forgiven] & whose synnes ben forȝouun & whose synnes ben hiled [healed].



New College Library, Oxford, MS 66, f. 215r
[Detail: upper right corner]

A prime example of a scribal dittography.

You may find my exposure of this poor scribe cruel or lacking in charity. After all, corrections in MSS are common occurrence. But these corrections gave Christopher Skelton-Foord and me a spark of sympathy with the scribe. For a brief moment, the six centuries separating us from the scribe vanished, and we were all schoolboys again, doing our best to fix our mistakes.

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